

## State of Celo Friends Meeting in 2024

As we remember 2024, the year was significantly marked by Hurricane Helene. Our meetinghouse was not damaged, but our surrounding community and county were devastated. Our meeting community came together with love and concern for one another. We provided spiritual support for many people and the meetinghouse was frequently full of new faces on First Day. We received significant physical and emotional support from the wider community, as people quickly came together with fortitude and equipment to clear roads and bridges. Our meetinghouse was an important gathering place for the wider Celo community, both immediately after the flood and in the following weeks. Over the ensuing weeks and months, as we have worked with neighbors from a variety of religious and political backgrounds, we have been profoundly moved by the presence of the Spirit in one another.

This past year started smoothly for Celo Meeting, with the continued use of our playground for both the Garden Preschool and the separate summer program for children organized by volunteer parents. Margithaus had gotten less use due to the COVID slowdown, but rentals started picking up, with two monthly renters scheduled in 2024. It was clear that the rental contract needed to be updated and streamlined, so a Margithaus ad hoc committee began the process. At the end of September when Hurricane Helene devastated the community, we felt fortunate that the meetinghouse compound was spared. Because of this, the Garden Preschool was able to resume the following week on the playground. This, and the resumption of weekly potlucks and First Day School, helped to provide some sense of normalcy in the midst of the hurricane cleanup.

Having an active First Day School program continued to be important to the growth of Celo Meeting and for our outreach to young families. We express our gratitude to Marilyn Cade for her work reestablishing a consistent program after the COVID hiatus. We also thank Mari Ohta-Weir and Becky Gray for their many years of dedication to our children. These three women stepped down from leadership at the end of 2024. To fill the need for leadership, we decided to hire Natasha Shannon to teach an elementary-aged class. This was a big step for Celo Meeting to pay someone to teach our children, but we decided it was the right thing to do, and Tasha has been a great fit for our meeting. We also engaged Julia Hudson, another Young Friend, to coordinate child care for the preschool-aged children. Both age groups require regular volunteer help from the Meeting each week, as more young families and children have been attending Meeting since the hurricane.

We held a Meeting for Worship with Attention to Animals at the end of April. It was beautiful and lively, with many children and their pets in attendance. At least 15 dogs, one rabbit, and one horse were present during our outdoor meeting. Several heartfelt messages were shared.

The Adult Religious Education Committee (ARE) continued to provide educational programs for Celo Friends Meeting to enhance both the individual's and the meeting's spiritual growth. Programs included sessions on Quaker eldering, a focus on social activists from Friends history to present day, and racial justice. Worship-sharing groups continued to meet to support community and deep sharing among members and attenders. These small groups meet monthly to consider spiritual queries and topics of mutual interest.

Our Building & Grounds committee was without a clerk for most of the year, but we managed to have the oaks taken down, which have leaned over Margithaus for many years, and organized an impromptu Work Day in mid-June to tackle, among other tasks, splitting and moving all that wood. We noted rather proudly that the average age of the crew was about 70—an issue we'll need to address in the future—but for at least one over-70 participant, it was “the best work day ever.”

Several Friends in key leadership positions have stepped aside, and we have found that people have less time for volunteer work. We have responded by breaking down key positions in Finance and First Day School into smaller roles. The elders are mentoring younger friends into these and other roles, like Archivist and the Conscientious Objection Committee. This adds another intergenerational aspect to our meeting culture that we all, young and old, value.

In August we held a threshing session regarding SAYMA. Many found this to be helpful as we consider the meeting's relationship with SAYMA—an ongoing discussion for Celo Meeting.

The Racial Equity Committee of the meeting met eight times with residents of the historically Black community of Lincoln Park in Burnsville, NC, at Griffith Chapel Church. We supported creation of their new non-profit Preservation Alliance of the Toe River Region (PATRR), whose purpose is to preserve the history and integrity of their community, cemeteries, churches, historic buildings, and residents since 1865, including that of enslaved people since 1790 and intermarriage with indigenous peoples.

A beloved Friend, James Mize, died in June of this year. Though he was only with us for a short time, he touched deeply the lives of our members. Our meeting held a memorial in the meetinghouse and then we processed to the South Toe River where his ashes

were scattered. Gil Johnson, Joyce's husband of 65 years, died in June, at the age of 93. Gil was able to remain home until his death and receive loving care from family, friends and home health care. A Memorial Service in the Manner of Friends was held for Gil at Arthur Morgan School. Philip Mitchell's beloved wife Beca was able to die peacefully at home as well, after a nine-year journey through frontotemporal dementia. Many meeting members brought singing, laughter, and worship and shared in the deep joy of their home where love was ever present.

The End of Life Committee reported that the Day of the Dead gathering in November, when we came together at the Celo Cemetery to tend the graves and memorial stone wall, was a highlight. We warmed ourselves around a fire tended by our teen friends and remembered the 95 known people, as well as those unknown, who reside in the Celo Cemetery. This year was especially significant as we named our neighbors who had died in the flood from Hurricane Helene just a few weeks earlier. A friend who had recently returned to the area shared a beautiful memory of the very short life of her baby who was buried in the cemetery 24 years earlier. In this gathering, we experienced one of the silver linings arising out of the flood devastation—a leap in community spirit and outreach—and so it was especially good to welcome several newcomers to our gathering from the local Arthur Morgan School.

Another silver lining following the devastation of Hurricane Helene was an anonymous donor reaching out to Celo Friends Meeting with an offer to help. This donor learned about Celo Meeting through a previous connection to Camp Celo. After considering this offer at a called Meeting for Business, we decided to accept a donation of \$100,000 to distribute to individuals and families who had suffered losses from the hurricane. A committee was formed to seek out those with need and make decisions about disbursement. Having a concrete way to assist our neighbors was a wonderful gift for Celo Friends Meeting. We made many heartfelt connections with neighbors we would not otherwise have had reason to connect with. Once a funding structure was established, more donations were forthcoming. In total, Celo Friends Meeting distributed \$132,950 to 72 individuals and families who had suffered losses because of the storm.

In the final months of 2024, a sense of community deepened as we came together with neighbors from a variety of backgrounds as a result of the hurricane. In this way we have used the difficulties we have faced to move forward together and grow in the Spirit.